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## A spiral of voice?

*When coworkers speak up on internal social media*

Madsen, Vibeke Thøis; Johansen, Winni

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# A spiral of voice? When employees speak up on internal social media

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper explores the discursive tactics that employees use when they speak up on internal social media (ISM) to gain support for their cause, and how this can develop into a ‘spiral of voice’ when organizational members interact with each other on ISM.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study is based on screenshots of four months of coworker communication on ISM in a Danish bank and on semi-structured interviews with 24 employees.

**Findings:** Employees succeeded in speaking up and gaining support on ISM by using eight different discursive tactics. These tactics helped move organizational issues from an operational to a strategic level, thus making the issues relevant for management as well as gaining the support of other coworkers. The visibility and persistence of communication on ISM forced managers to react.

**Research limitations/implications:** Further research should investigate whether similar tactics and reactions occur in organizations with a less open communication culture where it might be less safe for employees to speak up.

**Practical implications:** Organizations need to be aware of the dynamics of the ‘spiral of voice’ and of the way in which the visibility and persistence of communication on ISM forces managers to handle organizational issues.

**Originality/value:** This study is the first to explore what happens when employees speak up on ISM and to propose the concept of a ‘spiral of voice’ as an extension of the theory of “the spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

**Keywords:** Internal social media, employee voice, dissent, employee communication, discursive tactic, spiral of voice

**Paper Type:** Research Paper

## Introduction

Internal social media (ISM) offers staff a digital communication platform where they can share work knowledge and voice their opinions at any time (Leonardi, Huysman, and Steinfield, 2013). At the same time, it allows them to speak up and out to the organization (Garner, 2018; Liu, Zhu, and Yang, 2010). An employee can decide to speak up and comment on or criticize work procedures, to launch an issue of concern, or to challenge the identity of the organization (author, 2016b). If some coworkers begin to support the criticism or ideas, even more coworkers might be encouraged to support the 'cause'. In this way, communication on ISM can potentially develop into 'a spiral of voice' capable of capturing management attention.

However, the visibility and persistence of communication on ISM has turned employees into reflective and strategic communicators (author, 2016a; Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Van Osch and Steinfield, 2018), and the question is when and how coworkers will support issues raised on ISM.

Studies of mass communication have indicated that people may remain silent if they fear that their view is not supported by others, and this notion is central to the concept of the 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Previous research in the field of organizational communication has found that employee voice behavior builds on implicit voice theories; for instance, that it is better not to circumvent the boss and not to embarrass other people in front of their superiors (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Kassing 2007; Morrison, 2014). Morrison (2014) also found that both the perceived safety of employees and their perceived efficacy of voice were central to their decisions about whether or not to voice an opinion. Furthermore, a study of employees' use of email found that employees mainly used email to voice their dissent to other coworkers, while managers were left "out of the loop" (Hastings and Payne, 2013).

In contrast, the nature of ISM and its ability to address both managers and coworkers at the same time may give employees a sense of its potential impact and provide them with an opportunity to address issues that they would not otherwise have addressed (author, 2016b; Fägersten, 2015). Through ISM, employees may gain support from coworkers who either comment on or 'like' their entry. Their cause and their voice gain more weight as the number of 'likes' increases and other coworkers support and develop their argument. Their voice is co-constructed in interaction with other organizational members (Garner, 2013). Furthermore,

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visibility to all in the organization and the possibility that senior managers are following the conversations on ISM can also make response relevant or even imperative for the middle managers or support staff responsible for a specific issue (author, 2016b).

Whereas emergent research has looked into how the affordances of visibility and persistence influence the dynamics of communication on ISM and how the co-construction of voice influences the organization (author, 2016b; Leonardi, 2014; Rice et al., 2017; Treem and Leonardi, 2013), no research has been conducted into the speaking up of employees on ISM and the subsequent reactions of managers. Thus, the overall aim of this paper is to examine the extent to which employees are willing to speak up in new ways on ISM, the reactions of their managers and the consequences for the organization.

**Brief literature review and theoretical framework**

Research into internal social media is still in its infancy, although ISM is a topic that is rapidly gaining attention. Initial research on ISM concentrated on the affordances of ISM. Treem and Leonardi (2013) studied the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association, and since then, a series of studies has confirmed and expanded this study (cf. Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Leonardi et al., 2013; Ellison et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2017). In one of these studies, Vaast and Kaganer (2013) revealed that the affordances of visibility and persistence had the biggest influence in organizations.

Recently, several studies have explored the challenges of introducing ISM for internal communication (e.g. author, 2017; Sievert and Scholz, 2017), while few studies have explored the actual communication of employees on ISM. One of the first studies of internal communication and social media investigated the effect of social media on the rhetorical practices of employees and senior managers, and it found that social media facilitated multiple voices and the co-production of content (Huang et al., 2013). Other studies have investigated topics such as employee self-censorship (author, 2016a), the construction of organizational identity on ISM (author, 2016b), internal crisis communication (Fägersten, 2015), group norms (Uysal, 2016) and participatory employee communication on ISM (author, 2018).

However, the current study is one of the first to explore what happens when employees speak up on ISM and gain the support of coworkers, and how specific affordances may contribute to ‘spiral of voice’ dynamics.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on three sets of theories: The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1991), employee voice and silence (Detert and Edmondson, 2011; Morrison, 2014) and organizational dissent (Garner, 2013; Kassing, 2002).

### *The spiral of silence*

The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) is a theory of how public opinion is formed. According to the theory, public opinion about an issue arises when individuals interact with their social environment. Rather than relying on his or her own judgement regarding the issue, the individual assesses what the winning viewpoint is likely to be, since the individual fears isolating him- or herself by adopting a minority viewpoint. Dissenting individuals are threatened with isolation, and therefore it is safer to remain silent and go along with the dominant opinion: "Thus the active role of starting a process of public opinion formation is reserved to the one who does not allow himself to be threatened with isolation" (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 44).

Although this theory was developed as a theory of public opinion, it has also attracted the attention of organizational communication scholars (e.g. Ashford *et al.*, 2009; Bowen and Blackmon, 2003). Bowen and Blackmon (2003) found similar patterns in organizational communication, and this may imply that employees will not voice their opinion on ISM unless they are certain that a majority of coworkers support their viewpoint because they fear reactions and isolation. This dynamic has also been found in social networking sites such as Facebook (Gerheart and Zhang, 2015).

Importantly, however, the spiral of silence theory also states that people are likely to voice opinions that may become dominant public opinion in the future (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, p. 50). Thus, the question is whether or not the format and dynamics of communication on ISM will render employees more daring and thus encourage them to use ISM actively to contribute to or perhaps even shape the equivalent of 'public opinion' within the organization. An individual may not hold the viewpoint of the majority, but due to the visibility of communication on ISM, the employee who speaks out there can gain the support of coworkers (Van Osch and Steinfield, 2018). Consequently, the viewpoint expressed on ISM has the potential to become the dominant visible point of view. In other words, speaking up on ISM may lead to what can be termed '*a spiral of voice*'. Theories about employee voice

and silence as well as organizational dissent may add additional insights into the dynamics of this type of speaking up.

### *Employee voice and silence*

Theories about employee voice and silence shed light on the various factors that influence whether employees speak up or remain silent in an organizational setting. Employee voice has been defined as the “discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns or opinions about work-related issues with the intent to improve organizational or unit functioning” (Morrison, 2011, p. 375), and employee silence has been defined as “the withholding of potentially important input or instances when an employee fails to share what is on his or her mind” (Morrison, 2014, p. 174). According to Morrison (2014), the most important factors influencing the decision to speak up or to remain silent are the perceived safety and efficacy of voice of the employee. Employees assess whether they will be risking their job or their reputation in the organization by speaking up, and whether coworkers have gained anything from voicing their opinion in the past so that they believe that they can change anything. Only then can they make the decision to voice an opinion.

Furthermore, in a study of implicit voice theories, Detert and Edmondson (2011) found that employees have at least five taken-for-granted assumptions that affect how they behave in an organizational context: (1) Managers identify with the status quo, and they therefore perceive employee voice as personal criticism; (2) employees need solid data or solutions before they speak up; (3) it is disloyal and unacceptable to speak up in ways that challenge, question, contradict or expose one’s boss in front of his or her superiors; (4) managers dislike hearing bad news or being challenged in front of others in a group without advance notice in private; (5) Speaking up can have negative career consequences. In addition to these five implicit voice theories, Detert and Edmondson found indications that employees would not speak up if this could harm others or make themselves appear to be ‘show-offs’ rather than team players (Detert and Edmondson, 2011).

These implicit theories may interact and play a role on ISM, thus raising questions as to whether employees are willing to voice opinions on ISM. On the other hand, however, if employees do voice their opinions on ISM, this might imply that new implicit rules develop with the appearance of ISM, that employees feel safe on ISM, or that they perceive ISM to be effective.



### Organizational dissent

Theories of organizational and employee dissent can be traced back to Hirschmans' (1970) theory of "exit, voice or loyalty", the three different options available to employees who are dissatisfied with conditions in their organization. The theories relates to the theory of employee voice, that has been defined as "expressing disagreement or contradictory opinions about organizational practices, policies, and operations" (Kassing, 1998, p. 183). Research on dissent has been especially concerned with dissent triggers, dissent audience, dissent messages, and conversational outcomes (Garner, 2018).

Audiences of dissent are divided into three different types of audience: articulated, latent, and displaced dissent (Kassing, 1997). Articulated or upward dissent is dissent directed towards a person who has the power or the competence to do something about an issue. Latent or lateral dissent is directed towards someone in the organization who does not have the power to do anything, typically a coworker. Finally, displaced dissent is oriented towards someone outside the organization. The introduction of ISM often means that dissent simultaneously becomes both upward and lateral. So far, little research has explored how this affects organizational dissent, both in terms of the tactics used by employees when speaking up on ISM and the outcome of dissent on ISM.

Insight into the dynamics of employee voice on ISM may be obtained by drawing on previous research on the tactics adopted by employees when they articulate dissent in organizational contexts. Kassing (2002; 2005) identified five overall strategies of dissent articulation: solutions presentation, direct factual appeal, repetition, circumvention, and threat of resignation. These were supplemented by Garner (2009), who found eleven tactics used in a single conversation. In addition to Kassings' strategies, Garner included coalitions, inspiration, exchange, humor, venting, ingratiation, and pressure. *Coalitions* involve seeking support from the audience, for example by asking if they feel the same way about the 'dissatisfaction issue'. *Inspiration* makes appeals to values or morals. *Exchange* relates to offering to do something in exchange for an action. *Humor*, *venting*, and *ingratiation* are self-explanatory tactics, while *pressure* replaces Kassings' *threatening resignation* and additionally encompasses further threats of negative action.

In contrast to Kassing (2002, 2005), whose focus is on the dissenting employee, Garner (2013) perceives dissent as an interactional process among dissenters, managers and



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coworkers, and thus defines dissent as “an interactive process that occurs as a result of one or more subordinates expressing disagreement with policies, practices, or imperatives” (p. 376). The process perspective applies both to the construction of the event itself and to the way in which a dissent event connects to past and future dissent.

Drawing on the basis provided by the theory of the spiral of silence, by voice and silence theories and by theories of organizational dissent, and inspired by Morrison (2011) and Garner (2018), one might reason that ‘a spiral of voice’ can develop on ISM. The ‘spiral of voice’ can be defined as employees co-constructing ideas, suggestions, concerns, opinions, and disagreements about work-related issues in an interactional process. However, the question is whether employees use the same tactics in interactive conversations on ISM as found by Kassing (2002, 2005) and Garner (2009), or whether the existence of both upward and lateral audiences will develop or change their tactics when voicing on ISM. Assuming that it is possible to construct an argument in a certain way on ISM, we will put forward the idea of ‘discursive tactics’ defined as: “the use of language (discourse) in a specific way to help build an argument”. This leads to the following two sets of research questions:

- RQ 1:** What discursive tactics do employees use when they speak up on internal social media?
- RQ2:** How do organizational members interact with and react to organizational issues raised by employees on internal social media, and can such interactions lead to ‘a spiral of voice’?

**Research design**

An exploratory single case study (Yin, 2014) was conducted in 2014 and 2015 to understand the dynamics of communication and conversations on ISM and how they can develop into a spiral of voice. The Danish bank, Jyske Bank, was selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). It has 4,000 employees distributed across 110 different locations. The bank is recognized for its open communication culture, since it has had an active discussion forum called “The Word is Free” on the front page of its intranet since 2003. All employees can start a discussion, add a comment and ‘like’ discussions that have already started. Since 2014, the picture, name, job position, and location of contributors has been visible to everyone in the organization.

### *Data collection*

For this study, two sets of data were collected. The first set of data consisted of screenshots of communication in the discussion forum “The Word is Free”, collected over a three month period in September, October, and November 2014 and for a month in September 2015. In total, 72 posts with 522 comments and 3,443 likes were collected during the two periods and downloaded as PDF-files.

The second set of data consisted of semi-structured interviews with 24 employees from Jyske Bank about their communication behavior and conversations on ISM and about their perceptions of communication on ISM. On the basis of an analysis of the screenshots, employees were purposely selected (Neergaard, 2007) to represent a variety of communication behaviors and types of employee in terms of job position and geographical location. Following an analysis of the first three months of screen shots, 17 employees were interviewed in December 2014 and January 2015, and, after an analysis of the final month of screen shots from September 2015, seven employees were interviewed in October and November 2015.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 1-1.5 hours each. They followed an interview protocol comprising three major sections: (a) the person’s job, age, job seniority, and general activity on social media; (b) the person’s communication behavior; and (c) the person’s perceptions of communication on ISM, of their motivation to contribute, and of the impact of communication on ISM. The last section included two critical incident questions (Downs and Adrian, 2004) about examples of successful and less successful communication on ISM. These open-ended questions were asked to identify discussions which, in the view of the employees, had had an impact on the organization or were memorable discussions for other reasons.

### *Analyzing the data*

The screenshot and interview data were analyzed in two different ways.

*Analysis of the ISM discussion fora screenshots.* A three-step text analysis of the posts in the discussion fora was conducted to identify the discursive strategies used by employees and to determine how coworkers and managers reacted to their posts and comments. In the first step, all 72 posts were read and analyzed. It was found that 42 posts

developed into discussions attracting contributions from a wide range of employees from all levels of the hierarchy. Four slightly overlapping types of critical posts developed into discussions: (1) dissatisfaction with technology, (2) criticism of product, services and workflows, (3) ideas and proposals for the organization, and (4) questions asked out of puzzlement or frustration.

In the second step, the 42 discussions were studied in greater detail. How did employees articulate an entry? How did coworkers respond to different types of entries? How did the coworkers, managers, and other staff responsible for specific areas respond to critical comments within their field of responsibility? How did senior managers respond? Could specific patterns of communication be identified? In the third step, the employees' discursive tactics were identified by coding their arguments, and next, they were organized into eight higher order codes (see Table 2 in the Findings section).

*Analysis of semi-structured interviews.* The 24 interviews were subjected to a thematic two-step analysis. First, the interviews were transcribed, read thoroughly several times, and then coded in NVivo using thematic coding (King, 2012) to identify and describe communication behavior, reflections on behavior, and the perceived value of communication on ISM as assessed by the 24 interviewed employees. Next, the interviews were coded specifically related to perceptions of voice, discussions and critical posts and to managers' reactions to criticism and consequences to the organization (see Table 1).

[insert Tabel 1]

**Findings**

The study identified the discursive tactics used by employees to gain support on ISM, and it also demonstrated how their voices developed into 'a spiral of voice' when organizational members interacted and reacted to issues raised on ISM. The findings are presented in three sections: (1) discursive tactics used by employees to argue their case, (2) reactions of managers and support staff to critical voice, and (3) employees' perceptions of the dynamics of the discussions on ISM.

*Discursive tactics used by employees*

The analysis of the screen shots revealed that when the employees communicated in the discussion forum, they came across as very polite and reflective in their argumentation. They used a variety of discursive tactics, and it seemed that most of them made an effort to frame and formulate their entries so that their criticism was constructive and controlled. In particular, eight discursive tactics or ways of arguing were identified (Table 2).

[insert Table 2]

As the examples in Table 2 show, several discursive tactics used by employees involved mimicking the managers' way of talking about the organization by referring to competitors, economy, slogans, values, identity, and image. The following two examples illustrate the nature of these tactics. In the first example, a bank adviser complained about the telephone system and wrote: "It shouldn't be like this in Denmark's most customer-oriented bank" (September 2014, 4 comments, 15 likes). The bank adviser used a sales slogan as a discursive tactic to argue that the telephone system needed to be improved, thus highlighting a discrepancy between what the bank says and what it does. This tactic pushes the issue from an operational level to a strategic level, making it a concern for senior managers rather than merely a trivial issue about flaws in technology.

In the second example, a branch manager commented on a personal experience with a new malfunctioning credit card: "All things being equal, we ought to spare the customers from a really bad experience and, not least, avoid enormously bad publicity for Jyske Bank – and then pay for new credit cards – anything else can quickly become much more expensive" (September 2015, 17 comments, 4 likes). Here the branch manager uses image as a discursive tactic by referring to "bad publicity", thus transforming a personal experience with a malfunctioning credit card into an issue affecting the image of the bank.

The next example demonstrates that employees seemed aware that their voice would gain weight if they obtained support from coworkers. They deliberately used coalition tactics in asking for comments and support or in pointing out that the power of the number of likes and comments ought to have an impact. This is exemplified by the following extract: "Let's hope that all these comments will bring a better solution for the customers into focus" (September 2015, 6 comments, 63 likes). This meta-communication about the power of numbers can be considered a discursive tactic designed to take the issue to a higher level in

the organization. If just one person has a problem, it will not receive much attention, but when many employees in the organization have the same experience, the issue has to be given some attention. Here, the affordance of visibility of communication on ISM helps both to create support and to make the support visible to the organization.

Another way to create support was to use rhetorical tactics such as the deployment of examples, humor, and metaphors, and these tactics were often used in connection with one or several of the other discursive tactics, as the tactic in itself did not have the power to move issues from the operational to the strategic level.

### *The reactions of managers and support staff to the critical voice*

The responses on ISM of managers and support staff addressing specific issues raised on ISM seemed to follow a specific pattern for tackling concerns, questions, and frustrations expressed by the employees. Interestingly enough, the managers waited one, two, or even three days before answering, as if to allow the discussions time to develop. They all seemed to take the posts and comments seriously, as in the following example:

“Hi (name of employee),

First of all, thank you for raising a relevant issue that is an annoyance for you in your daily work. We have investigated how we can help you right now, so that the work procedure becomes smoother. SOLUTION: [here follows a description of a workflow]. Relevant business procedures will be corrected as soon as possible. Hope this smoother workflow can contribute” (Business Consultant, October 2014).

Most of the managers thanked the employee(s) for drawing attention to the issue and addressing it in the forum, acknowledged the problem and/or frustrations and stated that they were listening. They then accepted or rejected the issue. If they accepted it, they wrote that the employees were right and that the organization would be working on a solution. If they did not accept it, they typically supplied a long and well-supported explanation of why things were the way they were and stated that they would make an effort to address and answer all the comments and ideas prompted by the discussion. At times, a new discussion developed, but normally the employee simply thanked the responder for the answer: “Thank you for a super explanation :-)” (Cashier, September 2014). Employees publicly acknowledged that

things were not as simple as they had imagined or that they understood that the matter was out of the bank's hands, for instance as a result of the increased surveillance of banks following the economic crisis.

The study found that a well-formulated post using one or more discursive tactics would gain the support of coworkers, and that the power of framing and numbers would force managers or support staff to answer. However, posts that did not manage to raise the issue to a strategic level and the few posts that came across as angry outbursts did not receive an answer. In this respect, the discursive tactics seemed to be a first step initiating a 'spiral of voice', and the spiral developed as other coworkers interacted with the issues raised and managers and support staff answered.

#### *Employees' perceptions of the dynamics of the discussions on ISM*

From the interviews with the 24 employees, it was apparent that the employees were aware that entering the ISM communication arena entailed a risk, and that success would depend on their striking a cord that other organizational members could recognize and support. This is illustrated in the following example:

"It is difficult to be the first one to put something forward. You might have asked around. But was it only the two people that I asked that would agree with me? It is easier to be number 368 and say "I also think that we are losing our culture here" a week after you have seen that there are 300 others who think that way. So, it is a bit, - it is easier to walk in a flock when the flock has already formed. The difficult thing is to stand up and take responsibility by yourself" (Interview 20).

Similarly, employees found that it was difficult to be the first one to support a critical post: "If it is something controversial, then it [the first like] can be difficult ... When you say yes to a controversial post, then you become a co-signatory of it somehow" (Interview 20).

The power of numbers was perceived to have an impact: "It does not take a lot of mathematical skill to estimate that now ten per cent of all the employees, from cleaners to senior managers, have liked this. So something has to happen," (Interview 20).

Employees (e.g. Interviews 6 and 8) used ISM to raise issues to which they had not managed to obtain answers through traditional communication channels or lines of command.

They saw communicating on ISM as an important tool for solving an issue that they perceived as ignored, postponed or not taken seriously by support staff (cf. Interview 2). “It forces the responsible person to respond. Because now everyone has seen that this could be an option” (Interview 6). This indicates that ISM helped minority points of view to be seen and heard and thus had the potential to lead to changes in organizational processes and procedures.

The interviewed support-function staff (Interviews 9, 18 and 19) were aware of this strategy of circumventing the hierarchy and the normal chain of command. They were generally annoyed by this behavior because, according to them, small concerns could now come to attract too much attention: “The other side of the coin is that we have a tendency to pay attention to very small things that are not very important, which are inflated out of proportion” (Interview 18,). However, it might also be reasoned that they did not approve of this kind of behavior because it exposed their shortcomings or lack of action to the entire organization.

When a ‘spiral of voice’ developed on ISM, managers or support staff felt compelled to answer, and from the interviews it appears that the employees appreciated elaborated answers from the managers or staff in charge because such answers often helped them understand why things were the way they were. In this respect, the answers from the managers often seemed to have the effect of ‘taming the storm’ created by employees on ISM.

“When I have commented, I have sensed the presence of other people. If I am frustrated about my work processes and others do not know about it, I have to say something. Then they have written, ‘Thank you for your contribution. We will look into it and improve it’. I know it will not be improved today. But I think that when I point out problems, I can expect a response from the responsible people at the other end” (Interview 7).

The interviews with the employees thus confirm that they deliberately used the visibility and persistence of communication on ISM to raise issues, and that they carefully crafted their posts to win support. If they gained that support, they found that their issues were taken seriously and that they would get answers to their queries or that action would be taken to address the issues raised.



## Discussion

The findings of this study have indicated that employees at Jyske Bank use the ISM site to raise organizational issues, sometimes gaining the support of coworkers (thus initiating ‘a spiral of voice’) and prompting visible reactions from the managers and the staff who are responsible for the issue. In this section, four main findings will be discussed: 1) the use of specific reflective discursive tactics for speaking up; 2) managers’ reactions to employees speaking up; 3) the concept of a spiral of voice; and 4) the influence of voice on the organization.

### *Reflective discursive tactics on ISM*

Whereas Garner’s (2009) study of dissent tactics was primarily based on questionnaires and the self-reported behavior of employees in face-to-face interactions, the present study has examined examples of actual communication on ISM and added semi-structured interviews with employees about their ISM communication. The tactics identified by Garner (2009) were also predominant in the employees’ discursive tactics on ISM, but they were used in a slightly different manner. These were not direct dissent tactics; they were ways of speaking up by arguing and making a point in a discussion.

The direct-factual appeal (Garner, 2009; Kassing, 2002; 2005) was not identified as a stand-alone tactic in the present study; rather it seemed to be woven into most of the discursive tactics adopted when employees used arguments related to competition, economy, management discourse, image, and organizational identity to argue their case (cf. Table 2). The reverse was true for the tactic of venting. There were few outbursts of emotion on the ISM of the bank, and when they did occur, they were typically to be found in a comment on a discussion, rather than in a first entry. Garner also identified ‘inspiration’ as a discursive tactic: a message type that appealed to values or morals. This tactic was identified in this study, for instance when employees framed their criticism on the basis of arguments such as sales slogans, image and organizational identity to point out a difference between what the bank was doing and saying. Furthermore, due to the visibility and persistence of communication on ISM, the employees used a coalition tactic (Garner, 2009), since the very aim of voicing an opinion on ISM was to gain the support of other coworkers for a specific concern.

Finally, the use of rhetorical tactics such as humor, illustrative examples and metaphors indicates that employees devoted time to craft their entries and comments. In other words, the visibility and persistence of ISM communication prompted employees in Jyske Bank to behave in a reflective and strategic way when communicating on ISM (author, 2016b). They deliberately used discursive tactics to move issues from the operational to the strategic level so that their coworkers and managers would react to their posts.

### *Speaking up and managers' reactions*

According to the findings of this study, when employees communicated on Jyske Bank's ISM, they spoke up in front of their superiors and colleagues about matters that might indicate weaknesses in decision making and performance; they disseminated bad news, and some comments even had the potential to harm the reputation of another member of the organization. However, the employees seemed to take great care not to expose individual coworkers, for instance, the people in the IT department when they spoke up about a technological issue. According to the implicit voice theories formulated by Detert and Edmondson (2011), employees will not voice their opinions if they believe that doing so might involve risk or have negative consequences. However, Jyske Bank employees did speak up on ISM about topics of concern. How can this be explained?

One explanation may be related to the long-standing open communication culture of Jyske Bank, exemplified by the discussion forum "The Word is Free", which has existed for many years. The employees interviewed at Jyske Bank also stated that they perceived voicing concerns to be efficient and safe, which confirms Morrison's theory (2014) of the perceived safety and efficacy of voice. Additionally, it can be reasoned that due to its visibility, ISM creates new opportunities for employees to gain support from coworkers in the organization. Support from others posting likes or comments contributes to the perception of employees that it is safe and efficient to speak up.

What is perhaps of special interest is the way in which a post from one employee can lead to multiple likes and support from a series of fellow coworkers, thus creating a 'spiral of voice' that puts pressure on managers and staff with responsibility for a specific issue to respond on ISM. Managers are not only forced to respond to criticism; due to the characteristics of ISM, their response is visible to the entire organization. Thus, rather than an issue being addressed 'privately' with the employee(s) who raised it, the managers' handling

of issues and criticism becomes ‘public’ across the entire organization. In accordance with the concept of double crisis in crisis communication theory (author B, 2017), the managers risk *double criticism*: the first criticism is related to the problem raised, but the second criticism is related to their handling of the first criticism. If managers or responsible staff do not react in an appropriate way, they risk second criticism, and both types of criticism are visible to the whole organization. This may explain the rhetorical tactics used by managers, such as thanking the person who raised the issue and using an accommodating approach. Furthermore, it supports Garner’s process view (2013), defining dissent as an interactional process among dissenters, managers, and coworkers.

The critical comments posted by Jyske Bank employees exposed potential weaknesses in the organization, but speaking up might amount to prosocial behavior or even organizational citizenship behavior (Van Dyne, Graham and Dienesch, 1994). In this respect, the study shows that the introduction of ISM has the potential to change internal communication behavior in organizations.

#### *The spiral of voice on ISM*

The dynamics of communication on ISM that developed into a ‘spiral of voice’ grew out of employee awareness that senior managers either were watching and supporting the communication on ISM or might be doing so, and that the questions raised in this forum would be answered by support staff, middle managers, or even senior managers. According to the interviews, employees found that they were able to exert influence or even set the agenda in the organization when voicing an opinion on ISM and gaining the support of coworkers.

In Jyske Bank, the managers mostly acknowledged the concerns of the employees. They apparently listened, explained and tried to help the employees make sense of different issues. Sometimes they also succeeded in framing the issues in such a way that they gained support or understanding for organizational decisions.

The spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) advocates the view that people will not voice an opinion unless they know that it represents a majority point of view. The staff in the bank who initiated an entry could not know for sure how their voice would be received. However, by studying the critical entries of their coworkers, employees learn that they could gain support through the likes and comments functions of ISM. In the study by Hastings and Payne (2013) of the use of emails to express dissent, management was kept ‘out

of the loop', whereas in this study, employees in Jyske Bank deliberately used ISM to keep management 'in the loop', thus helping their voices to gain strength. They deliberately used discursive tactics that moved issues from an operational to a strategic level to catch the attention of senior managers. Thus, ISM shaped communicative processes in a different way than emails. This indicates that different types of communication technology afford different types of communication (Rice *et al.*, 2017; Treem and Leonardi, 2013), and that the combined visibility and persistence of ISM has the potential to promote the development of 'a spiral of voice' and thus influence organizational practices.

In Jyske Bank, the dynamics mainly seemed to render the organization more robust. The critical comments of employees that were made visible and persistent on ISM were skillfully answered by (middle) managers, and these answers helped employees make sense of their work and of the organization. It might be claimed that this renders the organization more resistant to external criticism as employees develop a better understanding of the reasons behind specific organizational decisions and are thus better prepared to defend the organizations when facing criticism from outsiders (author, 2016).

### Implications and future research

On the basis of the findings of this study, this paper urges organizations that introduce internal social media to be aware of the potential dynamics of 'the spiral of voice'. The visibility and persistence of communication on social media are ushering in a new era for the (external and) internal communication of organizations. Just as organizations must display their crisis management and handling of paracrises on public social media (Coombs and Holladay, 2012), they must display how they handle organizational issues and dissent on ISM. In this regard, organizations need to embrace communication 'transparency' and be willing to stand up for organizational decisions (author, 2018). It will be increasingly important to listen to and welcome input from employees, even if it seems time consuming, because employees tend to censor their input in an organizational context (author, 2016) and tend to speak up only if they have something relevant to add.

However, the case study of the bank considered here indicates that management need not respond immediately on ISM. On the contrary, it seems advantageous to allow discussions to develop before interfering. Taking employee voice seriously sends an important signal to the entire organization that any entry or comment is welcome and that the organization

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4 appreciates the competences and knowledge of its employees. This is relevant since  
5 employees will tend to remember how their voice was received in the past, and this will  
6 influence whether they will use their voice again (Garner, 2013). The advantage of embracing  
7 employees' discussions on critical issues also seems to be that employees as well as managers  
8 become aware of different perspectives on organizational issues and learn to act in a  
9 responsible way for the benefit of the organization. Such discussions contribute to sense-  
10 making processes in the organization. Thus, rather than fearing or avoiding a 'spiral of voice'  
11 on ISM, organizations can benefit from such processes.

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13 In this article, the development of the theory of a *spiral of voice* on ISM has been  
14 based on a single case study in a bank which is well-known for its open approach to  
15 communication. It is likely that a 'spiral of voice' will develop differently in other types of  
16 organizations with a less open approach to employee communication, or that silence will be  
17 the predominant strategy on ISM in some organizations (cf. author, 2018). Further research  
18 on employee voice on ISM is definitely needed.

## 30 Conclusion

31 One of the main contributions of this study has been to show that the spiral of silence (Noelle-  
32 Neumann, 1974) does not always develop where there is visible and persistent organizational  
33 communication. In fact, this case study has demonstrated that visibility and persistence of  
34 communication on ISM may foster a *spiral of voice*, at least in organizations, such as Jyske  
35 Bank, with an open communication culture and managers who are receptive to employee  
36 voice. ISM provides employees with a powerful communication opportunity in the  
37 organization, enabling them to gain support from coworkers through likes and comments and  
38 to thus create 'a spiral of voice' concerning a specific issue or problem. The visibility of the  
39 media puts pressure on support staff and middle and senior managers to answer questions  
40 from the employees. However, if the critical issues raised on ISM are explained and dealt  
41 with in an appropriate way on ISM, the spiral of voice can contribute to an open  
42 communication culture and lead to a more robust organization.

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**Table 1.** Coding of interview content related to speaking up in the *The Word is Free* forum.

Thematic codes	Examples of coded text from the interviews
<i>Perceptions of employee opportunities to voice</i>	“I ‘like’ or comment, if I can contribute..... to put emphasis on an entry” (Bank Adviser, Interview 21, October 2015) “You are not only a passive receiver” (Analyst, Interview 10, January 2015) “It is an advantage for me as a coworker since I can continuously influence things.” (Specialist, Interview 9, January 2015).
<i>Perceptions of value of discussions</i>	“They [discussions] are good if someone responsible allows the debate to develop a little, and then produces a serious closing comment” (Bank Adviser, Interview 6, January 2015). I also think it makes sense to those who are responsible. In this way the people who have an opinion enter the scene, and their ideas can be used in the ongoing development.” (Specialist, Interview 9, January 2015).
<i>Perceptions of managers’ reactions</i>	“I think that when I point out problems there is a response from the responsible people at the other end.” (Bank Adviser, Interview 7, December 2014).
<i>Consequences to the organization</i>	“The person shouting the most gets most power and impact” (Specialist, Interview 19) “I can think of at least three or four matters that I have been in touch with that have been changed or moved [after being discussed on ISM]. Changed for the better. I think so, absolutely.” (Bank Adviser, Interview 24, November 2015). “The organization is flattened a bit in this way with this [ISM]. Because they (top managers) are also active on the platform.” (Bank Adviser, Interview 11, January 2015).
<i>Managers’ reactions</i>	“It is excellent to have debates [on ISM], it provides thermometer measurements... What is the opinion of people? ... Okay this concept we have to change or adjust.” (Business Manager, Interview 18, October 2015)

**Table 2.** Coding of employees' discursive tactics used for expressing ideas, suggestions and opinions on the *The Word is Free* forum, September to November 2014 and September 2015.

Thematic codes	Description of codes	Examples of coded text from communication in the discussion forum
<b><i>Competition tactic</i></b>	When employees use competitors when arguing their case.	"it is a pity that we have to let our competitors get near to our good customers" "I believe that we can win the battle against the others [banks]" ".. where we risk to open up to "The blue ones""
<b><i>Economic tactic</i></b>	When employees use earnings, efficiency or waste of time to argue their case.	"Here the bank could really make a lot of money, and become very efficient" ".. a satisfying revenue"
<b><i>Company slogan and metaphor tactic</i></b>	When employees use sales slogans, values or managers' ways of speaking to argue their case.	"It shouldn't be like this in Denmark's most customer-oriented bank" "This is an obvious opportunity to make Jyske Bank a bit better bank" "You write that we must wash the stairs from above"
<b><i>Image tactic</i></b>	When employees use the bank's image or professionalism to argue their case	"In the eyes of the customers we come across as completely inexperienced in meetings with customers. Fantastic (not) image to get" "It doesn't seem professional in a meeting with a customer lasting 60 minutes to spend 10-15 minutes trying to get access..."
<b><i>Organizational identity tactic</i></b>	When employees use organizational identity or CSR or use "the Word is Free" to argue their case.	"First and foremost, we are a bank that provides advice" "In my perception JB has always been a responsible player in society" "First and foremost, the word has to be free, not necessarily 100% correct, so that you do not dare to say anything"
<b><i>Fact-based tactic</i></b>	When employees use facts to argue their case.	"Out of these, 70% have a private Home bank account ..."
<b><i>Coalition tactic</i></b>	When employees meta communicate about support from other coworkers.	"Am I the only person who thinks Jyske Bank has a challenge regarding this issue?!" "Let's hope that all these comments will bring into focus a better solution for us the customers" "I choose to write here since it is probably in the interest of a broader audience"
<b><i>Rhetorical tactic</i></b>	When employees use different rhetorical tactics to emphasize their point of view such as repetition, examples, metaphors, humor, rumors, avoidance, proposals, or questions	"I take the liberty to repeat the proposal." "A concrete example from my chair." "From my point of view, we have to close that gate as quickly as possible..." "but we do not pass a lean test" "... regardless whether we are good to animals, customers and have a red-green logo" "I have heard from the stock exchange of rumors..." "Do we have a deadline for when our patience runs out?"